

Jyotsna,

What is left of Art?

I think the essay tries to do three different things and doesn't quite mesh.

1. A polemic against Florida and similar views, which is fairly easy as a target but which is complicated by the writer (you) slipping off into fundamental kind of abstract Marxist refutation of the assumptions in Florida's work. Where do you want to publish this? This is ok for The Nation or Monthly Review, but might not work elsewhere.

2. A complaint against colleagues (and some students who imitate them) who try to avoid political critique of their (ART) work by claiming it is just art, art is its own world, that they don't care about success for communication, yadda yadda. Again, this seems like it is aimed at an artworld audience and isn't that pertinent to the Marxists (above).

3. An attempt to intervene in the current historical moment vis-à-vis media makers. Audience unclear..

At different times the term Art is used in slightly different ways and thus it doesn't all gel as it should.

You need to be clearer about the similarities and differences of "art" and "craft" and "work" that artists do. The social definition of art has changed over time and it helps if you clarify the nature of folk art, vernacular art, sanctified art, commercial art, mass art, etc. *Distinction* can be useful for this. It's also worth thinking about attempts like the arts and craft movement (Wm. Morris, etc.) to get people to see the art of everyday life.

I would disagree, for example, with the argument here that prepackaged food replaces the need or art of cooking and that pride in cooking is just some elitist yuppie thing. State and county fairs validate good home cooking, preserving, gardening, animal husbandry etc. It's not socially or class elitist to have and display a healthy and productive sheep...and there's an art to that, right?

But I think the main problem is that of rhetorical stance. What is it you want the essay to do? The three goals I see above are somewhat incompatible and perhaps three different essays should be written. Pointing out Florida's flaws in thinking and logic is easy to do if you are addressing a Marxist audience, but you can't use that conceptual shorthand to refute him to group 2. They don't grasp the Marxist fundamentals to begin with and to explain it all requires a different strategy.

I think that if you are trying to get group 2 to think and to stop the absurd idea that I just make art for myself, (a sour grapes stand) you need to address them in a different way, like pointing out that they don't really believe that because they feel warm inside when someone applauds their work, they would take money for doing it, sell copies, . etc.

Much more effective is to get them to move in a political direction by pointing out that making art that speaks to and for change is a good thing in its own right, and personally rewarding, etc. Or that they see injustices and can make art that addresses that. This is basically just the old organizer's problem of getting people to start to move and all the same techniques and issues are involved. Including that the organizer should be one step ahead of the folks but only one step.

Sometimes if you just are trying to hector people into action, especially artists, you could actually regret the results. Contra Carol Becker, There's a lot of artists who might be better left to their formalist navel gazing...would you really trust that they could or would make anything that is even vaguely politically correct if motivated to make a more political art? If students are following such folks, then it's probably more effective to simply lead by example, and make it clear that being an activist is a whole hell of a lot more fun than being a morose purist.

I never believe the silly justifications that students come up with in art classrooms anyway...once they have to pay the rent, raise children, think of the future in a real way, they will miraculously change their attitude. It's more to the point to get them to realize that they should hold on to their personal integrity and ethos, even if they have to enter the corporate world and marketplace to make a living....and to give them tools to understand how that works.

At times the tone and arguments a little holier-than-thou and you can't really persuade someone to your case by taking that position. Better, I think, to say, "yes, sometimes we make work just for ourselves--we are trying a new technique, or mastering a new technology, or seeing what we can do by going in a new direction, and we have no particular need or aim to show it to others...we are gaining knowledge that we may find useful later. And I may be very happy just sticking that in a corner of my studio, or looking at it every so often, or sticking it in to a show of other work I think is more substantial. the sketchbook is a valuable too."

But you can then move from that point to say that after mastering something like a technique or technology or area of exploration, you really do want to see its completion in something you can share with others, use for communicative purposes, etc. There are two sides to the romantic artist--one is self absorbed, the other is trying to change the world. Romanticism did arise from revolutionary times.

I think it's also useful in writing this kind off piece to make frequent mention of a variety of specific artists who are good examples of this, that , and the other.

I'm not so sure that the "genius outsider" model is the only one around. Certainly figures such as Jeff Koons and Matthew Barney are hardly "outsiders"--rather they are the slickest of insiders. Consider the curious development of experimental video art from beginnings with flakey Fluxes artists (Paik, etc), conceptual /minimalists, performance artists and activists, etc etc all using portapaks to the current chasm between sanctified

museum installation artists who get paid tens of thousands of dollars for a show (even hundreds of thousands it seems--Paik, Viola, etc.) and big festival performance artists (Riist, Abromavic etc) vs. erstwhile artist-activists Bordowitz, who usually can get medical coverage only through academic jobs (Juhasz, Vanalyne Green, Shu Lea Cheang, Janice Tanaka, etc .

I think you're mistaken about the history and function of arts education in the US at least. Arts educators, esp. those concerned with primary and high school education have always tended to be quite liberal--like librarians,... and for similar reasons--they think that art makes a difference, that having more of it around is a social good, etc. That the people who are faculty in college and university art schools, esp. conservatory ones, are susceptible to elitism is certainly true, but this is also a function of peculiar art world hiring patterns etc. E.g. Brakhage taught film at SAIC because a patron paid for it. In the 70s and 80s, tenure votes were held with no distinction of tenure track and adjunct faculty--non tenured and low ranked faculty could actually blackball someone from getting a job or advancing to tenure (same situation at Ohio University's film school). SAIC was more like an Italian Renaissance court with full blown intrigues, poisonings, back stabbings, etc. than anything else.

I disagree about pomo pastiche etc. We live in world in which EVERYONE understands at least on some level pastiche etc. Otherwise you couldn't understand The Daily Show. there is a lot of art that fancy art critcs can blah blah blah about but that fairly ordinary folk can also understand well enough--Warhol, and other Pop artists are a good example. Jackson Pollack is another. You don't have to know crap about Free Masonry to get the main idea of Barney's Cremaster, etc..

I'd recommend Julia Stallabrass's little book *Art Incorporated: The Story of Contemporary Art* for a good overview of the visual art scene. I think John Walker's *Art in the Age of Mass Media* is always servicable throughits various editions and permutations,

I've marked up my copy and will send that to you with various marginalia.